PRELIMINARY NOTES ON TUAREG
IN ARABIC SCRIPT FROM NIGER[1]

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1. Introduction

Tuareg[2] is a Berber language spoken in the central and southern Sahara
and the Sahel, in Niger, Mali, Algeria, and Burkina Faso. Tuareg society has
a long tradition of literacy. The Tuareg script, *tifinaġ*, is a continuation of
the Libyco-Berber script, a North-African creation inspired by the Phoeni-
cian and/or Punic alphabetic script(s) (Kerr 2010; Pichler 2007), which, in
Antiquity, was used in the Maghrib. As such, *tifinaġ*, has an Africa-internal
history of over 2000 years. The script is known and used by important parts
of the Tuareg population, in a wide array of social settings (Elghamis 2011).
Tuareg society is multigraphic. In addition to *tifinaġ*, since the 1960s an offi-
cial Latin orthography is used, which is taught in experimental schools and
other alphabetization modules. The third script in use for writing Tuareg
is the Arabic script, commonly referred to by the Hausa (originally Arabic)
term *ajami*. Tuareg Ajami is mainly found in those tribes which are consid-
ered experts in Islamic learning (so-called 'maraboutic tribes'); in fact, there
seems to be some kind of complementary distribution between the use of
Arabic script in these groups, and the use of *tifinaġ* by other parts of soci-
ety. Ajami—and Arabic of course—are the major vehicles for writing about
Islam; using *tifinaġ* for such purposes is considered inappropriate by many,
albeit not by everybody. However, members of the maraboutic tribes also
use Ajami for secular purposes, such as personal letters.

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[1] [In the transcription of Tuareg, the following special symbols (with their IPA equiva-
lents) are used: *ẓ* /zˤ/, *ḍ* /dˤ/, *ḷ* /lˤ/, *č* /tʃ/, *š* /ʃ/].
[2] We shall use here the exonym Tuareg rather than 'Tamashek', as found in many modern
Anglo-Saxon sources. The reason is twofold. In the first place, Tamashek corresponds to the
Mali Tuareg pronunciation of the ethnonym/glossonym, and can therefore be considered
an exonym itself in a Niger context ('Tamajaq' would be more appropriate). In the second
place, scholarly tradition both inside and outside Niger commonly uses 'Tuareg'. At least in
Niger, most Tuaregs do not object to the term, which has no derogatory connotations. See
Aghali-Zakara (1984).

While there exists reasonable documentation on *tifinaġ* (see Elghamis 2011), our knowledge of Tuareg Ajami is extremely poor, and its form, history and function remain largely unstudied. This is regrettable, as, according to some sources, early documents in Tuareg Ajami would date back to the 16th century CE (Gutelius 2000), which would make them earlier than any other Ajami tradition in the region, with the exception of Kanuri (Bondarev 2006).

In this article, we shall trace some of the main traits of Tuareg Ajami as currently used in Niger, on the basis of a small corpus gathered by Ramada Elghamis during his fieldwork on *tifinaġ*. It consists of four recent personal letters, one recent declaration of divorce and one four-page manuscript with religious content. The corpus is described briefly in the following; for more information and for the texts, see Elghamis (2011):

i.   Letter by a craftsman from Azel (near Agadez), belonging to the Kel Äwäy. 2005; 5 lines.
ii.   Letter by a craftsman from Teghazert (near Agadez). 2001; 5 lines.
iii. Letter by a marabout from Tillabéry, Ifoghas tribe. not dated (recent); 5 lines.
iv.   Attestation of divorce from a marabout from Tillabéry (same writer as iii), Ifoghas tribe. Dated 1430 AH; 5 lines.
v.   Letter by a person from Tahoua, Iwellemmeden tribe. 2000; 19 lines.
vi.   Manuscript with theological content, deposited at the archives of the Institut de Recherches en Sciences Humaines (Département des Manuscrits Arabes et Ajami) of Abdou Moumouni University in Niamey (manuscript No. 3988). According to the colophon, it was written by Mukhammad Assalix Ibn Mukhammad. The document is not dated, but may not be extremely old. About 40 lines in total.

While studying the orthography of such writings, many questions as to their context come up. The most basic question is to what extent the writings represent a tradition, i.e. a code learned from members of an earlier generation, or separate individual creations; the last possibility should not be ruled out *a priori*, as teaching of Arabic (including, of course the script), is a major element in Islamic education, and an individual may start writing his or her own language by means of this script without any further model. Supposing that the writing represents a tradition, one would have to determine the parameters of variation. Are we dealing with variation linked to geography and tribal affiliation (e. g. an Ayer Tuareg tradition as opposed to an Iwellemmeden Tuareg tradition), or are there different conventions related to different traditions of schooling, for instance between the Qādiriyya and Tijāniyya brotherhoods? Unfortunately, the present corpus does not allow

us to draw any conclusions on these questions, and they remain open to further research.

While the context of the Ajami texts studied here remains largely unknown, they allow us to say something about the graphic conventions employed in writing Tuareg in Arabic script. In this article, we shall present the most salient characteristics of Tuareg Ajami orthography in Niger, and, where possible, integrate them into the wider context of regional Ajami traditions.

2. Some General Notes on the Writing

Tuareg Ajami basically uses Maghribinian/Sudanic writing style, as witnessed, amongst others, by the use of ڢ ⟨f₁⟩ and ڧ ⟨q₁⟩, e.g.

$$\text{آقٜرۜيۡۿ}$$

⟨ʾaf₁arak₄⁰y₁ᵃ⁰⟩
afărag 'garden' [1][3]

$$\text{ءاكـفۡ}$$

⟨ʔaḍaf₁⁰⟩
aẓaf 'epidemic' [5]

Sometimes there is unexpected absence of letter linking, e.g.

$$\text{شهۡلَ وٰنۡ}$$

⟨šihula wᵃn⁰⟩
šihulawen 'greetings' [5]

Tāʾ marbūṭa may be used for final /t/, also when this /t/ is not a feminine marker, e.g.
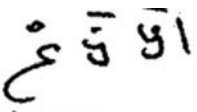
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[3] The numbers refer to the texts enumerated above.

آنْ ة̄

⟨ʾnᵒẗa⟩

ənta 'he' [5]

In syllable-final position, one sometimes finds *tanwīn* for a Tuareg Vn se-
quence; often, instead of the doubled vowel marking usual in *tanwīn*, the
vowel sign is written only once, or not at all, thereby obliterating the Tuareg
n (this could be called 'pseudo-*tanwīn*'). An example of *tanwīn* for a Tuareg
Vn sequence is:

آصُرَبِّ

⟨ʾamaḍᵒrayiⁿ⟩

amăḍray-in 'my younger brother' [5]

An example of 'pseudo-*tanwīn*' is:

آ يُ̄ عُ̄

⟨ʾdaḏaᶜᵒ⟩

ăzzănzăɣ 'I (will) sell' [5]

3. Notes on Graphemic Choices

3.1. *The Writing of Tuareg /z/ and /ẓ/*

The Arabic alphabet contains a number of letters, whose pronunciation is
merged in some pronunciation practices. This is especially the case of the
interdental fricatives, ذ ⟨ḏ⟩, ث ⟨ṯ⟩ and ظ ⟨ḍ⟩. In pronunciation practices of
the Arabic world east of Libya, these consonants are often pronounced [s],
[z] and [zˤ], respectively, thereby merging with س ⟨s⟩ and ز ⟨z⟩.[4]

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[4] All mentions of pronunciation practices refer to the pronunciation of Classical Arabic
texts. The phonetic structures and developments in the local vernaculars are often different.

In the Niger Tuareg texts studied here, س is used consistently for denoting /s/; one remarks however, that in Mali Tuareg texts, sometimes ث is used instead (Elghamis 2011). On the other hand, the most common way for writing Tuareg /z/ is by means of ذ, e.g.

⟨ʾadiḏa⟩
adi za 'this one; therefore' [6]

ز is also used, but less frequently. Similarly, ظ is used for the Tuareg pharyngealized ('emphatic') consonant /ẓ/:
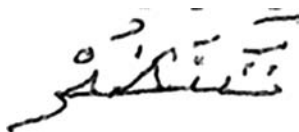
⟨tanaḏum⁰⟩
tan ăẓum '(the one) of the fasting' [4][5]

While these choices are easily understood from the point of view of the eastern Arabic pronunciation traditions (and one might assume that the choice of *ḏāl* instead of *zāʾ* is motivated by the high frequency of determiners with *ḏāl* in Arabic), they contrast with pronunciation traditions of the Maghrib. In the Maghrib, when the interdental fricatives are simplified in the pronunciation of Classical Arabic, they are pronounced as dental stops, and not as fricatives.

The use of *ḏāl* for /z/ is also found in the Hausa Ajami tradition, and its use in Tuareg could be considered an adaptation to Hausa practices. Such an analysis is impossible for /ẓ/; while the sound is common to Tuareg and (Middle Eastern) Classical Arabic, it does not exist in Hausa. As a consequence, the identification of Arabic ظ with Tuareg /ẓ/ cannot derive immediately from Hausa practice.

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[5] Note that in this example, the *tāʾ* is written in its isolated form, even though it is connected with the following *nūn*.

3.2. *The Writing of* /ġ/

Tuareg /ġ/ is phonetically very similar to Arabic /ġ/. As a consequence, one would expect the use of the sign غ. While this is the case with some authors, others consistently use ع for Tuareg /ġ/, e.g.

اكَقَـتِنْ

⟨'k₄ʿasan⁰⟩
ăgeɣ-asăn 'I did to them' [5]

The reasons behind this choice may be twofold. In the first place, the sign غ is also used for denoting /g/ (see below), so not using it for /ġ/ may be a way of preventing ambiguity. In the second place, the normal Tuareg treatment of Arabic /ʿ/ in loanwords is substitution by /ġ/; thus the name *ʿUṯmān* becomes *Ġosman* in Tuareg. One could assume that the two are merged in the pronunciation of Arabic, and therefore equivalent options when choosing a way to render Tuareg /ġ/. However, in the Tuareg spoken by maraboutic tribes the pharyngeal pronunciation of /ʿ/ is maintained in Arabic loanwords. As Ajami is strongly tied to these groups, this explanation may therefore not be that compelling.

3.3. *The Writing of* /g/

Classical Arabic does not have a phoneme /g/. Tuareg does, and several devices are found for writing /g/. The first device is the use of *kāf* with three dots underneath. The position of the dots with respect to each other varies; sometimes the single dot is above, sometimes it is below, e.g.

ڲ   ڲ

Alternatively, /g/ can be written by means of the Arabic letter *ġayn*; sometimes both options occur in a single text, e.g.

⟨ʾafₗaraġ⁰nₑyₗitᵒ⟩
afărag net 'his garden' [1]

⟨ʾafarak₄ᵒyₗaᵒ⟩
afărag 'garden' [1]

The use of triple-dotted *kāf* for /g/ is found elsewhere in the Islamic world; one may cite as an example the 'New' (i.e. post-Medieval) Sous Berber orthography from Morocco (van den Boogert 1997: 61). The use of *ġayn* for /g/ is paralleled by Hausa and Kanuri orthographies.

3.4. *The Writing of /č/*

This sound—absent in Classical Arabic—appears only once in the corpus. There it is written as a *tāʾ* with four dots, e.g.

⟨tawiyaqₗatₗiⁿ⟩
*tawəyăq-qăč-čin* 'you brought it there' [1]

This usage is reminiscent of the Hausa use of *ṭāʾ* (i.e. *tāʾ* with three dots) to render Hausa /c/.

3.5. *The Writing of /ŋ/*

The velar nasal—extremely rare in Tuareg and absent in Classical Arabic—does not occur in the corpus. Forms elicited by Ramada Elghamis from the same authors as those of some of the letters have a *qāf* with three dots underneath. A similar usage is known from Fulfulde orthography: Arensdorff (1913: 13) defines ڧ, i.e. *qāf* with three dots above the letter, as a "variante qu'on rencontre quelquefois chez certains auteurs 'torodos' ou 'nigériens'".

3.6. *The Writing of* /e/

In Tuareg Ajami the vowel /e/—not phonemic in Classical Arabic but a stable phoneme in Tuareg—is represented in a number of ways. The first way is by means of a dot underneath the consonant. This vowel sign, known as the 'Warš dot', derives from the *ʾimāla* sign in the Qurʾanic reading tradition transmitted by ʿUṯmān ibn Saʿīd al-Quṭbī, known as Warš, e.g.
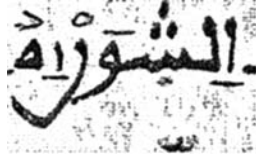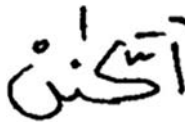

⟨ʾilš$_e$wal⁰ ʾihu⟩
iššewăl ihu 'he speaks *ihu*' [6]

The 'Warš dot' can be accompanied by *yāʾ* and a superposed *ʾalif*, e.g.
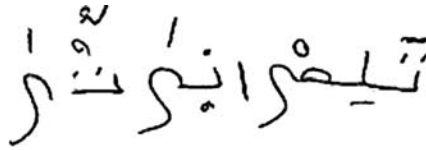
⟨talim⁰ʾn$_e$y₁ᵃt⁰y₁ᵃ⟩
taḷəm net 'his camel' [1]

/e/ may also be expressed by means of the superposed *ʾalif* alone, e.g.

⟨ʾakkanᵃn⁰⟩
əkkânen 'that pass' [5]

The use of the 'Warš dot' accompanied or not by *yāʾ* and a superposed *ʾalif* for /e/ is also known in other West-African Ajami traditions, among others Hausa (cf. Mischlich 1911: 5). Alternatively, *kasra* (normally /i/) or *fatḥa* (normally /a/) are used to render Tuareg /e/, e.g.

⟨ʾafaḍ⁰⟩
efăḍ 'thousand' [4]

⟨ʾaġafₗ⁰⟩
eɣăf 'head' [3]

⟨ʾiddawwanₑyₗᵃ⟩
edăwănne 'chat' [2]

There are no special signs for /o/ (written with *ḍamma*) and the central vowels /ə/ and /ă/. The vowel /ə/ can be written by any of the vowel signs, with a certain preference per author for one or the other option. The vowel /ă/ is always written with *fatḥa*.

4. TUAREG *AJAMI* IN ITS REGIONAL CONTEXT

Determining the regional context of Tuareg Ajami presents us with interesting problems. On the one hand, Tuareg has a phonemic system that is much more similar to Classical Arabic than that of other Sahelian languages. Sometimes this similarity leads to the expected choice from the Arabic point of view; thus, the pharyngealized ('emphatic') consonants of Tuareg are written with the signs for the emphatic consonants of Arabic. However, as shown above, the choice does not always take the expected direction; thus, in spite of the existence of a sound /ġ/ both in Tuareg and in Arabic, some writers use غ for Tuareg /g/ and ع for Tuareg /ġ/. Moreover, while some choices correspond to Arabic usage in general, they do not always correspond to usage in Northern Africa—which, from the point of view of trade and scholarly networks would have been the most logical point of reference. This is in any case true for the writing of ظ for /ḍ/.

At some points there are connections to other Sahelian Ajami traditions. This is especially clear in the choice of graphemes for sounds which do not exist in Classical Arabic. Thus the use of the 'Warš dot' for /e/ is commonly found in West-African traditions of Arabic writing; similarly, the use of triple-dotted *qāf* for /ŋ/ and of four-dot ت for /č/ have parallels in Fulfulde and Hausa practices, respectively.

The situation is more complicated in the case of unexpected pronunciations of graphically unmodified Arabic letters, such as ﻍ for /g/ and ﺫ for /z/. While these have parallels in the surrounding Ajami traditions, one can only appreciate these choices when also taking into account the local traditions of pronouncing Classical Arabic. In present-day Niger, there exist pronunciation traditions of Classical Arabic that are quite different from the pronunciation conventions in the Arabic-speaking countries. These traditions are locally not considered to be wrong, but have a certain prestige. From personal experience we may refer to a Hausa imam in Agadez, who, when speaking Arabic, uses a Libyan type of Standard Arabic with a good Arab Arabic pronunciation. However, when citing Qurʾān or Ḥadīt̲, he switches to an entirely different mode of pronouncing Arabic; for example, his casual pronunciation of *qāf* is the uvular stop [q], as in Standard Arabic, while his Qurʾanic pronunciation is the ejective stop [kʾ]. In the study of Ajami orthographies, the importance of local pronunciation traditions of Classical Arabic (which may in fact have preceded the development of the Ajami) should not be underestimated. Any serious investigation in Ajami orthography should therefore also include an investigation in the pronunciation of Arabic.

The Tuareg Ajami graphemic choices studied here present us with many intriguing questions. Even if some choices would be immediately related to the Ajami traditions of the region, and not derived from common pronunciation practices of Arabic, the historical implication of this remains to be studied. If it is true that Tuareg Ajami goes back to the 1500s (Gutelius 2000) or even earlier, it is very well possible that Tuareg Ajami constituted the basis for (some of) the other Sahelian Ajami traditions. However, without a more comprehensive investigation into the nature and the history of Tuareg Ajami, there is no way to prove or disprove such a hypothesis.

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